

The Reception of Croce's Aesthetics in America

di David D. Roberts*

ABSTRACT

Croce's *Estetica* of 1902 immediately attracted attention in the United States, and he remained central to American discussion in aesthetics until the later 1960s. He won some able partisans, but he was widely misunderstood, even labeled an apostle of excess, license, and debauchery. Still, Croce remained a familiar figure well into the 1960s. Most observers granted the enduring importance of his contributions, but by the early 1950s he was attracting more plausible criticism. Most damaging was the charge that he propounded an essentialist aesthetics, claiming to specify the essence of art, thereby restricting what cannot, in fact, be restricted. However, such criticisms were often simplistic and one-sided, taking themes out of the wider context of Croce's historicist cultural program. Although periodic calls for reassessment followed his eclipse in the later 1960s, a single-minded focus on Croce's aesthetics has proven deleterious to his fortunes in America.

[_Contributo ricevuto l'8/06/2021. Sottoposto a peer review, accettato il 4/02/2022.](#)

Croce's *Estetica* of 1902 immediately attracted attention in America, and he remained central to discussion in aesthetics until the 1960s. At first he was widely misunderstood, even as he attracted influential partisans. He eventually drew some legitimate, if one-sided, criticism, and by the 1960s he had been eclipsed, thanks especially to criticisms by analytical philosophers. But periodic calls for reassessment have followed.

It was Croce's aesthetics, as outlined especially in his *Aesthetic* of 1902, that first attracted attention to him in America. Even before he published the book, the influential review *The Nation* had begun following his ideas, thanks especially to

Joel Spingarn, a young literary scholar who would become his first influential American partisan. Upon discovering Croce's work, Spingarn began corresponding with the Italian thinker in 1899¹. But it was only in 1910 that Spingarn, newly appointed professor of comparative literature at Columbia University, proclaimed himself a Crocean in a widely-discussed lecture entitled *The New Criticism*.

As Spingarn explained it, Croce had showed, above all, that art was genuine creation, as opposed to mimesis—the expression or representation of something already in existence. And on that basis he made the soon-to-be-familiar Crocean arguments against moral judgments in art, against reductionist expla-

* University of Georgia (U.S.A.).

nations in terms of race, the environment, or 'the times', and against fixed genres, rhetorical figures, and rules of decorum. The question about any work of art was not how well it conformed to some prior model, but what it sought to express and how completely it succeeded².

For the most part Spingarn proved an able interpreter, but Croce encountered a persistent obstacle almost immediately. In 1903 the influential Spanish-born American philosopher George Santayana offered a damaging review of the *Aesthetic*, characterizing Croce's conception as abstract, artificial, and barren. That was only to be expected, added Santayana, from a «strictly transcendental philosophy»³ like Croce's. Santayana's review was criticized by Croce's partisans for decades, but in light of Santayana's influence, it had a lasting impact. And he remained a prominent antagonist, later accusing Croce, for example, of espousing «art for art's sake»⁴.

Thanks partly to Santayana's review, Croce was quickly typed as a 'neo-idealist' or 'neo-Hegelian' by American critics. He surely owed some debt to Hegel, but he engaged Hegel only after Vico and Marx. If anything, he read Hegel through a Vichian lens. So it did not help that, as Lienhard Bergel noted in accounting for Croce's overall lack of resonance in the United States, that Americans were so little acquainted with Vico⁵. That reinforced the erroneous as-

sumption that Croce's thought was an offshoot of Hegelianism.

Croce took over wholesale Vico's notion of the autonomy of the creative imagination, which does not provide images of something already here⁶. He insisted on an ongoing role for the rational concept as well, but he related imagination and cognition in a circle to emphasize that neither is higher or final. 'Poetry' wells up continually, and thus the endless openness and creativity of the world. There is no scope for Hegel's definitive overcoming or telos.

Meanwhile, Croce authorized the Scottish scholar Douglas Ainslie to prepare English translations of his central philosophical works. First came the *Aesthetic*, which appeared in English in 1909, soon to be followed by the *Logic* and the *Philosophy of the Practical*. But it is widely agreed that these translations did not serve Croce well. They were often clumsily literal, yet, as Gian N. G. Orsini emphasized, they also conveyed a misleading sense of crucial Crocean terms like *intuizione* and *fantasia*⁷.

Still, within a decade of the appearance of the *Aesthetic*, Croce was clearly a figure to be reckoned with in America. He was one of twelve scholars from around the world to be invited to present lectures marking the inauguration of the Rice Institute (now Rice University) in Houston, Texas, in 1912. While declining to attend in person, Croce submitted what became one of his best-known

essays, *Breviario di estetica*, translated by Ainslie and published immediately as part of the Rice proceedings. It has been published in several English editions since, and it remains an effective introduction to Croce's thought⁸.

In this essay Croce made it even clearer that he was speaking of 'art' in a broad sense indeed, so the stakes were not remotely confined to art as a delimited sphere of human endeavor. In a sense, every use of language is poetic, creative, expanding the world. And language encompasses painting and music. Art, then, is the moment of creativity and innovation in the ongoing human response to what the world has become so far.

Although Joel Spingarn's reading of Croce was selective, he was better equipped than most to grasp the wider implications of Croce's evolving aesthetics. And he continued to defend Croce against what were becoming the standard objections⁹. At the same time, he drew others to Croce's position, perhaps most notably the iconoclastic but influential essayist H.L. Mencken, who credited the Spingarn-Croce position with countering all manner of confusion and waywardness among American intellectuals¹⁰.

After Santayana, perhaps the most prominent of Croce's early critics were Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, leaders of 'The New Humanism' that emerged before World War I, then achieved its greatest influence around 1930. Discussing Croce in 1925, Bab-

bitt concluded «that he combines numerous peripheral merits with a central wrongness and at times with something that seems uncomfortably like a central void». Babbitt was nervous about the radically historicist tendency of Croce's thought, which seemed to dissolve what Babbitt found essential—eternal standards and values¹¹.

According to Babbitt, Croce offered a romantic «cult of intuition in the sense of pure spontaneity and untrammelled expression» and reduced «art to a sort of lyrical outflow that is not disciplined to any permanent center of judgment». In Babbitt's view, Croce, more than anyone, had given philosophical expression to the modern cult of the speed and power of the outer world¹².

Babbitt's collaborator, Paul Elmer More, offered variations on the same theme as he criticized Croce's *Nuovi saggi di estetica* of 1920¹³. Not only was Croce a Hegelian, but his accent on the autonomy of art manifested the romantic cult of genius; Croce was telling creative writers that they were not bound by the dictates of morality or truth. More found Croce comparable to the surrealists – or even to James Joyce, with his emphasis on a stream of consciousness not subject to purpose or choice. Croce, in short, was central to the disturbing modern tendency to dissolve the humanistic conception of man as a responsible creature with free will.

Spingarn had long criticized such characterizations, but because he was

primarily concerned with aesthetics and art criticism, he did not address the deeper questions about Croce's radical historicism that were implicit in the critiques leveled by Babbitt and More¹⁴. In fact, Croce was as opposed as Babbitt to 'decadent aestheticism' but sought to head it off on a different, more novel basis, one that Babbitt failed to grasp.

Spingarn explicitly sought to head off the notion that Croce stood for romantic indulgence and 'art for art's sake'. In *The Growth of a Literary Myth* (1923), he admitted that he had been trying to adapt Croce for an American audience, but he hoped he had not been responsible for the worst of the current misconceptions – the notion that Croce stood for emotional debauch, when in fact he had been seeking to transcend the romantic-classic antithesis altogether¹⁵.

Still, the Babbitt-More critique found echoes a generation later, in 1950, in a diatribe by the historian Chester McArthur Destler in *The American Historical Review*. He found Croce the major proponent of a dangerous new philosophy promoting presentism in historiography, relativism in values, impressionism in the arts, subjective activism for the individual, violence as a mode of social action, and success as the supreme value in public affairs. Croce, according to Destler, had thereby helped lay the foundations for Italian Fascism¹⁶.

So in some circles Croce was considered an apostle of excess, license, and

debauchery, but it was symptomatic of American confusion that, another generation later, Hayden White, a historian considerably more influential than Destler, criticized Croce for something like the opposite reasons in his pathbreaking book *Metahistory* published in 1973.

White twisted Croce's way of assigning historiography to the realm of art into a conservative acceptance of the status quo. Croce, he claimed, saw art as literal representation; indeed, Croce was the culmination of the nineteenth-century tradition of realistic representation that made historiography aesthetically satisfying but removed it from the realm of action. Moreover, Croce's mimetic conception severed historiography from the modernist artistic innovations of his own time. He was undercutting the scope for more creative, «modernist» modes that, as White saw it, might free historiography for more active, creative roles¹⁷. White's way of invoking aesthetics in his critique of Croce's historiography furthered confusion about Croce's overall enterprise and made his position seem more old-fashioned and conservative than it actually was.

Aesthetics was the focus of Croce's most significant exchange with an American thinker, the noted pragmatist John Dewey. Reviewing Dewey's *Art as Experience* in 1940, Croce hinted that Dewey could overcome certain inconsistencies by becoming more consistently historicist¹⁸. Dewey, for his part, had treated

Croce dismissively in his key work on aesthetics, *Art as Experience*, published in 1934. As Dewey had it, Croce's way of emphasizing intuition and expression stemmed from his deeper idealism, taking only mind as real, and indicated «the extreme to which philosophy may go in superimposing a preconceived theory upon aesthetic experience, resulting in arbitrary distortion»¹⁹. Croce took considerable offense at Dewey's charges²⁰.

In an excellent summary of this encounter, written in 1970, George Douglas emphasized that not only was Croce never a Hegelian, but his philosophy of experience was not so different from Dewey's, as outlined in *Experience and Nature*²¹. Among more recent students of Dewey, Thomas Alexander has offered the most discerning assessment of Dewey's aesthetics, including Dewey's exchange with Croce and the charge of Croce and others that Dewey's aesthetics betrays unacknowledged elements of idealism²². In retrospect it seems unfortunate that a deeper dialogue between Croce and Dewey never developed.

Despite Croce's undoubted prominence, aesthetic discussion had produced a sense of anomaly and frustration among Croce partisans by the time of his death in 1952. Writing in the influential «Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism», Frederic Simoni charged that the idealist stereotype, especially, had nurtured a whole tradition of misunderstanding around Croce in America.

Especially damaging had been George Santayana's early review of Croce's *Estetica*. Simoni concluded that «reference to Croce in current literature constitutes a comedy of errors»²³. Taking a slightly different tack, Gian Orsini found it odd that American intellectuals had failed to engage Croce, even though he had anticipated by decades several of the apparently most innovative currents in American intellectual life²⁴.

Still, Croce remained a familiar figure in American aesthetics and art criticism into the 1960s. Leading literary scholars like Monroe Beardsley, Cleanth Brooks, Morris Weitz, and William Wimsatt engaged him, often explicitly, but even when only implicitly he was a prominent target. By this point he served largely as a foil, though most granted the enduring importance of his contributions. In 1957 Wimsatt and Brooks devoted a chapter to Croce in their ambitious, multi-volume *Literary Criticism: A Short History* and stressed the ongoing value of his assault on fixed genres, classical figures of speech, and rules of propriety. And they played up Croce's important, if diffuse, impact²⁵. In the same way Beardsley granted some value to Croce's well-known attack on the concept of literary types and even the distinction between one art and another.²⁶

But criticism of Croce now got the upper hand. This period saw the turn to analytical philosophy in the English-speaking world. Writing in 1986, Richard

Shusterman offered a penetrating post-mortem in explaining how Croce, after having been central to aesthetics in the United States for decades, came to be «deposed» through the criticisms of analytical philosophers²⁷. Shusterman relied especially on a 1954 anthology edited by William Elton, *Aesthetics and Language*, with contributions from Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as the United States²⁸.

In light of its impact in America, Elton's volume certainly merits our attention, but it is equally important to consider Monroe Beardsley and Morris Weitz, whom Shusterman deemed probably the two leading American analytic aestheticians of the period. Neither is included in the Elton volume, but each explicitly engaged Croce.

Croce was, and remains, especially hard to pin down or pigeon-hole, yet American critics kept trying, typing him variously as an idealist, a romanticist, an intuitionist, an intentionalist, an expressionist, an impressionist, a formalist, an emotionalist, and so on. Some of these characterizations were more plausible than others, but for the most part they were simplistic and misleading.

For example, Wimsatt and Brooks contended that Croce offered «a master theory of art for art's sake»²⁹. This characterization would not have to be critical, but it tended to be cast, and read, as a criticism. Santayana had earlier made a comparable charge, which Spingarn

had sought to rebut. But by the 1950s the notion that Croce stood for 'art for art's sake' had come to be widely heard.

To be sure, the charge had a superficial plausibility. Croce was determined to specify the autonomy of art, which meant, most obviously, that art could not be harnessed for didactic, moralistic purposes. He also sought to establish the autonomy of art against the generally Hegelian notion that the insights of art are eventually swallowed up in the universal understanding afforded by philosophy.

But to make Croce a proponent of art for art's sake was one-sided, neglecting the wider context of his thinking. His larger point was that art is not a thing apart; the artist is not some genius qualitatively different from ordinary people. Implicitly at issue in Croce's whole conception was how art relates to everything else. In an important sense the very idea of art for art's sake was nonsensical in Crocean terms.

Limiting though such pigeon-holing was, the active criticisms aimed at Croce were surely more damaging. Let us isolate a few, intersecting in some ways, before considering how they might be countered.

The most penetrating was the charge that Croce, with his insistence that all art entails a combination of intuition and expression, was not only too eager to generalize but was guilty of essentialism, claiming to specify the essence of art.

Shusterman summed up the case nicely in his 1986 assessment. The analytical aestheticians, he said, reacted successfully against the romantic aesthetics of Croce, with «its distinction-demolishing essentialism that all art is simply expression, with no substantial distinctions to be made, because all are unique». Without such distinctions, we are left with a woolly mass³⁰. Those charges do indeed run through the key critiques of the 1950s.

Croce was the major foil for Morris Weitz's effort, in an especially influential article of 1956, to go beyond criticism of particular aesthetic theories to question aesthetic theory itself. «Aesthetic theory» – he argued – «is a logically vain attempt to define what cannot be defined, to state the necessary and sufficient properties of that which has no necessary and sufficient properties, to conceive the concept of art as closed when its very use reveals and demands its openness»³¹.

Both J.A. Passmore and Stuart Hampshire, in the Elton anthology, similarly argued, implicitly in opposition to Croce among others, against generality and generalization. Passmore contended that the aesthetician interested in literature and its criticism should become a literary theorist closely acquainted with literary works and critical practice rather than a philosopher of art, seeking some mythical aesthetic essence. That quest gives us mostly «dreary and a pretentious nonsense»³².

Passmore conceded that Croce had been right that we cannot fix boundaries between, say, tragedy and comedy, but he had been wrong to deny them between one art form and another – music and sculpture, for example. For Croce, whatever the art form, «what we are *really* contemplating is a certain form of human feeling»³³. Hampshire similarly stressed the pitfalls of generalization³⁴. The charge that Croce was an essentialist, restricting what cannot be restricted, was implicit in Passmore's argument, while both Beardsley and Weitz explicitly criticized Croce for essentialism.

Beryl Lake, also writing in the Elton volume, made the related charge that Croce had constructed an a priori, closed system that was irrefutable – and thus of limited value³⁵. We might consider Lake's charge in light of one of Weitz's points – that Croce's theory omits the very important feature of the public, physical character of, say, architecture³⁶. In fact, Croce claimed to encompass architecture; even in that realm, however, creation and evaluation rested on intuition-expression. But then, as Lake insisted, this is essentially true a priori in Crocean terms.

In their celebrated article on *The Intentional Fallacy*, Beardsley and Wimsatt conceded that Croce had offered some telling attacks on intentionalism, but the prevailing drift of the *Aesthetic*, they insisted, pointed in the opposite direc-

tion. For them the intention of the artist has no bearing on the evaluation of the work³⁷.

These criticisms were certainly closer to the mark than the earlier, far-fetched charges of Santayana, Babbitt, and More. And Croce himself was partly responsible because, despite his ongoing protest against philosophical system and his claim to offer mere *sistemazioni*, he never entirely got beyond the systematic impulse. Virtually from the beginning, in fact, it stood in tension with the historicist, open-ended tendency of his thinking, and it sometimes could seem to get the upper hand.

Orsini noted that though Croce had proclaimed in the *Logic* of 1908 that even the concept varies, he increasingly accented immutability³⁸. That tendency could arguably be found in Croce's aesthetics, but the thrust of his thought more generally was increasingly historicist. It was only later in his career that he came to characterize his position as «absolute historicism» and to argue that the human world boils down to «nothing but history»³⁹.

The midcentury American critics were too prone to take one side of a point, to take points out of wider context, or to take them from one context and make them general. So their characterizations were often one-sided, overstating the case or missing Croce's wider point. And their criticisms were not always mutually consistent.

Let us return to the key complaint

that Croce was an essentialist, restricting what cannot be restricted. Was his concept of art sufficiently open-ended? Almost in spite of himself, Croce allowed for lots of wiggle room in critical judgments; he could always find reason for praising or denigrating whatever work, using categories like 'appropriate', 'fully realized', or 'deeply-felt'. So he could seem rigid and slippery at the same time.

Orsini recognized that criticism for Croce ultimately rested on individual sensibility⁴⁰. To be sure, the critic will be assessing intuition and expression, but because there is so much room for disagreement about what qualifies, it was not as if Croce's putative system enabled him to lay down definitive judgments. This meant, however, that he simply was not restricting art to the extent that critics like Weitz and Passmore suggested. Nor was his system as closed as Lake contended.

In his determination to demolish any sort of systematic aesthetics, Weitz seemed to miss Croce's main point, which is entirely congruent with Weitz's own dominant notion that art cannot be pinned down. To be sure, Croce sought to pin down something about artistic creation and evaluation, but doing so did remotely entail prescription or proscription about what counts as art.

Create anything you want, or can, but the process will entail a moment of what Croce called intuition and expression. He found it useful to characterize hu-

man creativity and the process of artistic creation in these terms, in light of the cultural challenges, confusions, and possibilities on the table, but doing so did not foreclose anything. As Croce insisted perhaps most pointedly in concluding *The Philosophy of the Practical*, stopping the conversation was the last thing he envisioned⁴¹. But those who claim to be clearing up historically specific confusions and showing the way forward can seem categorical and peremptory to some, even if the wider framework being proposed entails openness, freedom – and thus endless novelty.

The claim that Croce's position, as essentialist, was 'distinction-demolishing' rings true up to a point, but sometimes it was recognized that Croce made distinctions. The problem was that he was too rigid, even arbitrary, in doing so. By implication, he was trying to be too systematic, and it was time to loosen up, moving from categorical to pragmatic distinctions.

In complaining about «the dreariness of aesthetics», Passmore advocated ruthlessly making distinctions that may seem arbitrary but that may be justified pragmatically: the proof being that the distinction's «particular line of fracture gives rise to interesting generalizations»⁴². In other words, we should make aesthetic distinctions, but not on the basis of some general, philosophically grounded criterion.

Shusterman noted that Beardsley sought a comparable loosening. In dis-

tinguishing the perceptual aesthetic object from its physical base and intention, he explicitly recast the issue in pragmatic terms. Because there is no ontological grounding for such a distinction, no given essence of the aesthetic object, it is our job «to propose a way of making the distinction» that can be justified pragmatically: «one can only point to the conveniences of adopting it, the inconveniences of rejecting it»⁴³.

Croce was no pragmatist, but his framework allowed for, even mandated, more flexibility than a binary of pragmatic-categorical would suggest. At the same time he, too, stressed the individuality, the uniqueness, of works of art and the pitfalls of generalization. Depending on the context, he could be heard as saying exactly what his critics did on the subject.

It might seem plausible to accuse Croce of the intentional fallacy because, as he saw it, the artist's intuition is crucial and expressing it is the core of the artistic process. But authorial intention was not remotely the key either to the aesthetic judgment – is it a work of art? – or to the evaluation of success. Up to a point, in fact, Croce made much the same argument as Beardsley and Wimsatt, though he referred to 'the intentional heresy' rather than 'the intentional fallacy'. The work stands on its own. Meaning is to be found only within the work. Artists are to be judged by their actual achievement, not by what they intended to do or thought they were doing⁴⁴.

But the artist intends a resonant, effective work, even if it pushes the boundaries, as did, for example, Marcel Duchamp's 'Fountain' and John Cage's '4:33'. Such works dramatize the scope for disagreement about what counts as heretical or fallacious in any reference to the artist's aims. And partly for that reason American discussion of Croce and intentionalism was hard to sort out. Orsini noted that Joel Spingarn had gotten it right, showing why Croce's conception was not intentionalist⁴⁵. Yet Beardsley claimed that Spingarn, drawing on Croce, had offered a classic defense of intentionalism in his lecture of 1910 *The New Criticism*. Spingarn's argument, he said, reveals how Crocean expressionism is a form of intentionalism⁴⁶.

Beardsley was drawing on a noted 1954 essay by John Hospers, *The Concept of Artistic Expression*, labeling it a thorough examination of Croce's «successful expression» as an intentionalist standard⁴⁷. Beardsley's use of Hospers against Croce was tendentious, to put it charitably. But though Hospers does not frame «successful expression» as an «intentionalist standard», his way of questioning expression certainly merits our attention. He found expression far too narrow as a general description of artistic creation. The ends, aims, or inner springs of artistic activity are disparate, and the claim that art is always expressing is as one-sided as the claim that it is always imitating⁴⁸.

Like Weitz's charge of essentialism, Hospers's critique of expressionism applies to Croce up to a point. But the qualified defense of Croce in response to Weitz also applies to Hospers's critique of expression. Croce's use of expression allowed for more openness and flexibility than Hospers's critique let on. In the last analysis, Beardsley's characterization of Crocean expressionism as a form of intentionalism was misleading at best.

The persistent tendency to misrepresent Croce helped prompt some further efforts at explication beginning in the 1960s. The most important was Gian Orsini's *Benedetto Croce: Philosopher of Art and Literary Critic*, first published in 1961, but Patrick Romanell, Merle Brown, and Giovanni Gullace also contributed significant works⁴⁹. However, they were fighting a rearguard action.

Richard Shusterman's contention that Croce succumbed to the criticisms leveled by analytical philosophers certainly rings true, but whether Croce's eclipse was justified is another matter. And it was not the end of the story in any case.

Shusterman explicitly agreed with critics that Croce's essentialism made for 'woolly', and ultimately boring, criticism. Still, writing in 1988 he found Croce due for a contemporary re-reading in light of much that had happened in the cultural sphere since the 1950s⁵⁰. The Italian thinker had anticipated some of Jacques Derrida's key insights, especially the linguistic turn that fed into contemporary

poststructuralism and postmodernism. More generally, Shusterman suggested, Croce's overall post-realist orientation had foreshadowed aspects of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Richard Rorty, all then much in vogue. Still, little resulted from Shusterman's call for a reassessment⁵¹.

Carrying the argument for Croce a step further was René Wellek, the distinguished Viennese-born American author of, among other things, a monumental history of literary criticism. In 1986 he tackled Croce's fate in his volume on American criticism, but his most compelling testimony came in the volume on French, Italian, and Spanish criticism in 1992. Croce's eclipse in America was a chapter in a wider story, and Wellek found something especially anomalous about Croce's fall. In movements influential at various points since his death – from Russian formalism and structuralism to hermeneutics and deconstruction – he «is not referred to or quoted, even when he discusses the same problems and gives similar solutions». Yet Croce, for Wellek, had arguably been the most erudite and wide-ranging figure in the history of criticism⁵².

With their broad frames of reference, both Shusterman and Wellek provide some sense of what was being lost, at least provisionally, as Croce was marginalized. Drawing out the implication of the figures and movements they named suggests that Croce's aesthetics is not

easily delimited, that wider matters of cultural self-understanding were at issue.

To develop the point, let us cut to the second layer in Shusterman's explanation for Croce's fate at the hands of the analytical aestheticians:

The underlying (but not explicitly formulated) reason for their view was simply that Croce's emancipatory theory was no longer necessary to preserve art's integrity against undesirable explanatory models, because by this time the autonomous study of art, at least literary art, enjoyed a promising model of its own – the New Criticism. By the fifties, Croce's aesthetic of protean, distinction-defying freedom was not only gratuitous but an embarrassment and potential threat to literary art's new protector, whose categories of explanation promised art's integrity but necessarily involved restriction and closure. Unneeded and unwanted, Croce's essential message of freedom came to be seen as an empty essentialism⁵³.

It is certainly true that the New Criticism came next, but Shusterman conveys a misleading impression nevertheless. His own comparisons with Derrida, Gadamer et al. indicate that Croce's enterprise far transcended any concern simply to preserve the autonomy of art against reductionist approaches. Moreover, even if his «essential message of freedom» came to be conflated with an empty essentialism, the matter can hardly be left there, as if Croce's «essential

message of freedom» really was nothing but «an empty essentialism». Although Shusterman recognized that the New Criticism that supplanted Croce “necessarily involved restriction and closure”, he offered no comment or analysis, and above all no comparison with Croce.

The newer approach was more restrictive especially in treating literature as not merely autonomous but self-contained, isolable if not isolated. Was that advantageous for art, or for the culture as a whole? At the same time the English scholar, I.A. Richards, one of the key forerunners of the New Criticism and a critic particularly hostile to Croce, hoped to make criticism ‘scientific’, especially through the insights of psychology⁵⁴. Croce, in contrast, had always resisted the cultural hegemony of science. At issue were questions of cultural proportions far transcending delimited issues in aesthetics.

To be sure, there were plausible reasons for American observers to have started with Croce’s aesthetics, even to take it as central to his overall enterprise. But doing so made it hard to see him whole. It had been especially issues in historiography that led him to Vico, to aesthetics, and to philosophy in general. The American focus on aesthetics deflected, and still deflects, from Croce’s wider concerns, program, and contribution.

Although their criticisms of Croce now seem bizarre, Babbitt and More,

with their New Humanism, were operating on the same level as Croce, offering a program intended to address the whole crisis-ridden cultural complex. Each side was seeking a new balance in light of the tendencies toward self-indulgence and romantic excess that the modern cultural situation seemed to foster. But from a Crocean, radically historicist perspective, Babbitt was still assuming a transcendent framework, still operating under the shadow of the old metaphysics.

In attacking the views he imputed to Croce and Spingarn, Babbitt insisted that «in creation of the first order [...] the imagination does not wander aimlessly, but is at work in the service of a supersensuous truth that is not given to man to seize directly [...]. Creation of this order [...] is something more than the intense expression of some expansive ego, whether individual or national». In art and life, Babbitt went on, «our whole modern experiment [...] is threatened with breakdown, because of our failure to work out new standards with this type of imagination»⁵⁵. Though he shared much of Babbitt’s diagnosis, Croce posited a more novel solution, based on a particular understanding of historical knowing and history-making action, as he sought to show the way to a post-metaphysical moderation.

George Douglas’s aims, in his essay of 1970, were more limited than Shusterman’s, but he got closer to the wider

point as he stressed that Croce's aesthetic was a theory of human experience more than a philosophy of art. The Crocean notion of intuition-expression was intended to show that the experience of the artist is inseparable from ordinary experience⁵⁶. Artists are not creatures apart, which was the implicit premise of many of Croce's American antagonists.

Of course Croce's wider view of the world had implications for aesthetics and art criticism, but those dimensions, stripped from the wider context of his thought, could easily lead to misplaced emphases or, on occasion, to downright foolishness. In the last analysis, Croce's aesthetics compromised his wider fortunes in America.

_ Note

1 _ See E. Cutinelli-Rendina's exemplary edition, *Carteggio Croce-Spingarn*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2001.

2 _ J.E. SPINGARN, *The New Criticism*, in *Creative Criticism and Other Essays, new and enlarged*, Kennikat, Port Washington-New York 1964, pp. 19-38.

3 _ G. SANTAYANA, *Croce's Aesthetics*, «Journal of Comparative Literature», I (1903) 3, pp. 191-95.

4 _ G. SANTAYANA, *Obiter Scripta: Lectures, Essays and Reviews*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1936, pp. 30-34; 72-73.

5 _ L. BERGEL, *Croce in America* [1953], in ID., *L'estetica del nichilismo e altri saggi*, Bibliopolis, Napoli 1980, pp. 31-34.

6 _ B. CROCE, *Estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale* [1902], Laterza, Bari 1958, pp. 242-44, 254-56, 489.

7 _ G.N.G. ORSINI, *Benedetto Croce: Philosopher of Art and Literary Critic*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale-Ill. 1961, pp. 49-50, 304-306, 320 note 2.

8 _ *The Book of the Opening of the Rice Institute*, 3 voll., The Rice Institute, Houston-Texas, 1912. See vol. 2, pp. 430-517, for Croce's *The Breviary of Aesthetic*.

9 _ J.E. SPINGARN, *Creative Criticism*, pp. 162-78.

10 _ H.L. MENCKEN, *Criticism of Criticism of Criticism*, in I. BABBITT et al., *Criticism in America: Its Function and Status*, Harcourt Brace, New York 1924, pp. 176-90.

11 _ I. BABBITT, *Croce and the Philosophy of Flux* (1925), now in his *Spanish Character and Other Essays*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston 1940, pp. 66-72. The quote is from p. 66. Babbitt had criticized Croce's conception of art as expression as early as 1910; see I. BABBITT, *The New Laokoon: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston 1910, pp. 222-28, 238.

12 _ I. BABBITT, *Croce and the Philosophy of Flux*, pp. 68-72.

13 _ P.E. MORE, *The Demon of the Absolute*, vol. 1, Princeton University Press, Princeton-N.J. 1928, pp. 29-41.

14 _ J.E. SPINGARN, *Creative Criticism*, pp. 194-97.

- 15 _ *Ibidem*, pp. 162-78.
- 16 _ C.M. DESTLER, *Some Observations on Contemporary Historical Theory*, «American Historical Review», LV (1950) 3, pp. 504, 517.
- 17 _ H. WHITE, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1973, p. 385. I offered a critique in D.D. ROBERTS, *Rethinking Hayden White's Treatment of Croce*, «Rethinking History», XVII (December 2013) 4, pp. 448-470.
- 18 _ Croce's review appeared in «La Critica» in 1940; it was included in his *Discorsi di varia filosofia* (1945), then published in English as *On the Aesthetics of Dewey*, «Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism», VI (March 1948) 3, pp. 203-207, with a follow-up note by Dewey, *A Comment on the Foregoing Criticisms*, pp. 207-209. Croce responded in *Dewey's Aesthetics and Theory of Knowledge*, «Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism», XI (September 1952) 1, pp. 1-6, which was included in Croce's *Indagini su Hegel e schiarimenti filosofici* (1952).
- 19 _ J. DEWEY, *Art as Experience*, Minton Balch, New York 1934, pp. 294-95.
- 20 _ B. CROCE, *Dewey's Aesthetics*, cit., pp. 5-6.
- 21 _ G.H. DOUGLAS, *A Reconsideration of the Dewey-Croce Exchange*, «Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism», XXVIII (Summer 1970) 4, pp. 497-504.
- 22 _ T.M. ALEXANDER, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1987, pp. 1-13, 25-6, 281-82 note 25.
- 23 _ F.S. SIMONI, *Benedetto Croce: A Case of International Misunderstanding*, «Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism», XI (September 1952) 1, pp. 7-14. The quoted passage is from p. 9.
- 24 _ G.N.G. ORSINI, *Note sul Croce e la cultura americana*, in F. FLORA (a cura di), *Benedetto Croce*, Malfasi, Milano 1953, pp. 359-366.
- 25 _ W.K. WIMSATT JR., C. BROOKS, *Literary Criticism: A Short History*, vol. 2: *Romantic and Modern Criticism* [1957], University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1983, p. 519.
- 26 _ M.C. BEARDSLEY, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, Harcourt Brace, New York 1958, p. 255.
- 27 _ R. SHUSTERMAN, *Analytic Aesthetics, Literary Theory and Deconstruction*, «The Monist», LXIX (January 1986) 1, pp. 22-38.
- 28 _ Published in the US by Philosophical Library (New York) and in the UK by Blackwell (Oxford).
- 29 _ W.K. WIMSATT JR., C. BROOKS, *Literary Criticism*, pp. 500, 505, 512-14.
- 30 _ R. SHUSTERMAN, *Introduction: Analytic Aesthetics: Retrospect and Prospect*, «Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism», XLVI (1987), p. 117.
- 31 _ M. WEITZ, *The Role of Theory in Aesthetics*, «Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism», XV (September 1956) 1, p. 30.
- 32 _ J.A. PASSMORE, *The Dreariness of Aesthetics*, in W. ELTON (ed. by), *Aesthetics and Language*, Philosophical Library, New York 1954, pp. 50-55; p. 55 for the quote snippet.
- 33 _ *Ibidem*, p. 53.
- 34 _ S. HAMPSHIRE, *Logic and Appreciation*, in W. ELTON (ed. by), *Aesthetics and Language*, pp. 161-169.
- 35 _ B. LAKE, *The Irrefutability of Two Aes-*

thetic Theories, in W. ELTON (ed. by), *Aesthetics and Language*, pp. 104, 107.

36 _ M. WEITZ, *The Role of Theory in Aesthetics*, p. 29.

37 _ W.K. WIMSATT JR., M. C. BEARDSLEY, *The Intentional Fallacy*, «Sewanee Review», XXXIV (July-September 1946) 3, pp. 477, 487.

38 _ G.N.G. ORSINI, *Benedetto Croce*, p. 285.

39 _ B. CROCE, *Discorsi di varia filosofia* [1945], Laterza, Bari 1959, vol. 2, pp. 15-17; B. CROCE, *La storia come pensiero e come azione* [1938], Laterza, Bari 1966, p. 53.

40 _ G.N.G. ORSINI, *Benedetto Croce*, pp. 281.

41 _ B. CROCE, *Filosofia della pratica. Economia ed etica* [1908], Laterza, Bari 1963, p. 406.

42 _ J.A. PASSMORE, *The Dreariness of Aesthetics*, pp. 45, 49.

43 _ R. SHUSTERMAN, *Analytic Aesthetics*, p. 33; M.C. BEARDSLEY, *Aesthetics*, pp. 52-53.

44 _ B. CROCE, *I fini dei poeti* [1905], in his *Problemi di estetica*, Laterza, Bari 1949, pp. 61-64. See also G.N.G. ORSINI, *Benedetto Croce*, pp. 201, 234, 260-62.

45 _ G.N.G. ORSINI, *Benedetto Croce*, p. 262.

46 _ M.C. BEARDSLEY, *Aesthetics*, p. 489.

47 _ *Ibidem*, p. 490; J. HOSPERS, *The Concept of Artistic Expression*, «Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society», LV (1954-55) 1, pp. 313-44.

48 _ J. HOSPERS, *The Concept of Artistic Expression*, pp. 318-19.

49 _ M. BROWN, *Neo-Idealist Aesthetics: Croce-Gentile-Collingwood*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 1966; G. GULLACE, *Benedetto Croce's Poetry and Literature: An Intro-*

duction to Its Criticism and History, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale-Ill. 1981. Romanell contributed, among others works, a helpful introduction to Croce's *Guide to Aesthetics*.

50 _ R. SHUSTERMAN, *Croce on Interpretation: Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, «New Literary History», XX (1988) 1, pp. 199-216, especially p. 199.

51 _ Without reference to Shusterman, I addressed some of these issues, placing Croce alongside Derrida and Gadamer among others, in my *Nothing But History: Reconstruction and Extremity After Metaphysics*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1995. For a reprint edition (The Davies Group, Aurora-CO 2007), I added a new introduction considering the book's fortunes to that point.

52 _ R. WELLEK, *History of Modern Criticism*, vol. 6: *American Criticism 1900-1950* [1986], Yale University Press, New Haven 1986, p. 63; see also vol. 8: *French, Italian, and Spanish Criticism, 1900-1950* [1992], pp. 187, 189.

53 _ R. SHUSTERMAN, *Analytic Aesthetics*, p. 32.

54 _ Richards's few references to Croce in his pivotal *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Harcourt Brace & World, New York 1925, ooze with contempt. See pp. 16, 28, 255.

55 _ I. BABBITT, *Genius and Taste* [1918], in J.C. BOWMAN (ed. by), *Contemporary American Criticism*, Henry Holt, New York 1926, p. 108.

56 _ G.H. DOUGLAS, *A Reconsideration*, p. 503.

— |

| —

— |

| —